

In what respects, if any, should the primates be equal?

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Human beings are undoubtedly blessed with the most extraordinary gift of nature—the most sophisticated consciousness. However, it is also this superb awareness which shackles some *Homo sapiens* with an abject humiliation - an irrational horror of their animality. The human animals' realisation of their biological, hence finite, condition can impel them to fearfully disclaim their ancestry and strive to 'transcend' their natural condition. The human species' claim to superior physical and moral status in the natural world on the basis of either their 'unique' rationality, dignity or worth, is specious. Traditional western philosophical, religious, scientific and literary ideologies have initiated and sustained a myth that the other animals, including the Great Apes other than *Homo sapiens*, are inferior members of the natural world. These ideologies have contributed to our primate cousins' exclusion from the opportunity to relish a life suffused with physical, intellectual and emotional dignity.

In this article I intend to briefly appraise some of the areas within western traditional ideologies which have perpetuated the attitude that all animals, other than human, are not entitled to be treated with even the minimal degree of respect accorded to some human beings. I also intend to evaluate contemporary sources which indicate that in view of recent field studies and scientific research on the non-human primates, existing objections to the extension of equality (implying moral obligations) to the other primates¹ can no longer be sustained. Recorded attempts of the search by western scholars for an explanation of the origins of the species, particularly the existence

¹ References in this article to 'the other primates', 'non-human primates', 'other Great Apes' refer to those primates other than human presently taxonomically categorised within the order Hominoidea as chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans.

and nature of the human species, reveal that theories have been swayed either by disarming ignorance or misplaced conceit. From audacious beginnings as humble 'prickly barks'² (c.500BC), the human animal has become elevated in status to the extent that humans generally consider themselves to be the sublime result of the biological evolutionary process. The notion of the human animal's supremacy over inanimate and all other animate living forms gained credence, in part, because of the acceptance of the influential works of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322BC).³

Following his categorisations differentiating plants, animals and humans, Aristotle concluded that what clearly differentiates humans from the other animals is that the human alone, of all animate things, has the capacity to reason. Whilst other animal beings and plants have the ability to perceive or respond to environmental factors, they do not have consciousness, that is, they lack self-awareness and the ability to reason abstractly. Rather than use reason, plants respond to stimuli, and animals 'obey their instincts'.⁴

Furthermore, Aristotle's claim of the existence of a 'principle of rule and subordination in nature at large' also contributed to sanctioning the idea that animals exist without any intrinsic worth.⁵

Plants exist to give subsistence to animals, and animals to give it to (men). Animals...serve to furnish man not only with food, but also with other comforts...Accordingly, as nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, all animals must have been made by nature for the sake of men.⁶

² Anaximander, quoted by Plutarch, in *Early Greek Philosophy*, J. Barnes, (Penguin, London, 1987), p. 73.

³ Aristotle, 'Parts of Animals' in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Book 1, Chapter 1, 645b, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991), p. 998.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans E. Barber, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), I.V., 9, p. 6.

⁵ *ibid.*, V, 1, p. 91.

⁶ In this article, the generic 'men' or 'man' is retained solely for the purpose of quoting ad verbatim. See Aristotle, *Politics*, V111, p. 95.

As animals exist within nature without the capacity to reason (being guided instead by instincts) they are, therefore, provided by nature for the use of the human being.

Apart from the influence of ancient Greek writers such as Aristotle, the writings of the ancient Hebrews and later of Christian theologians were also instrumental in the formation of a demeaning attitude towards the other animals within western culture. In the ancient Hebrew text The First Book of Moses, called Genesis⁷, two aspects in particular warrant attention. The account of the origin of the human within the world: 'So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.'⁸ reflects an existing cultural belief in the pre-eminence of the human species, especially the male of the species. Furthermore, instructions to humans to 'have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth'⁹ authorises humans to adopt authority over all the animals.

Later Christian doctrines also reflect the disparate relationship between humans and the animals. In his work *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) advises 'There is no sin in using a thing for the purpose for which it is. Now the order of things is such that the imperfect are for the perfect...things, like plants which merely have life, are all alike for animals, and all animals are for man.'¹⁰ In addition, Aquinas' ruling 'it matters not how man behaves to animals, because God has subjected all things to man's power'¹¹ would have undoubtedly contributed to reinforcing cultural beliefs of the mental and moral supremacy of the human and exacerbated existing exploitative practices against the animals. As a result of these doctrines, the other Great Apes, in particular, have been especially maligned within western cultural discourse and symbolism.

⁷ Genesis, *The Holy Bible*, (King James version, 1611), pp. 5-64.

⁸ *ibid.*, 1:27, p. 6.

⁹ *ibid.*, 1:28, p. 6.

¹⁰ Aquinas, from 'Summa Theologica', quoted in *Animal Liberation*, P. Singer, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1976), p. 211.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 213.

Of all the animals, the non-human primate has been most 'deeply involved in western ideas on human nature, morals and origins'¹² and consequently occupies a prominent, yet paradoxical, position within western cultural symbolism. In traditional eastern cultures monkeys and apes were accorded respect as they were considered to be mediators between the human and a deity, or alternatively were personified and revered as a deity.¹³ In comparison, apart from a period in the eighteenth century when apes were pictured as gentle, 'human-like creatures', western culture has tended to stereotype the primates as savage, brutal beings; beings personifying licentious or evil behaviours—behaviours deemed as uncivilised or immoral within human societies. Furthermore, the primates were generally the objects of derision, being perceived as either intriguing zoological exhibits or as creatures deserving extermination.¹⁴

The non-human primates have long endured being the 'object' of human fascination. Fascination itself, if applied with consideration and courtesy towards the being who is viewed, is not necessarily a problem. However, the present ambiguous biological¹⁵ and moral standing of the other primates within western communities is *not* a reflection of our society's 'fascination with the primates', but rather an attitude which reflects the fact that our fascination has mostly been perverse. Unlike the other animals, however, the non-human primates *do* occupy a unique position in the psyche of humans and in the natural world. To the consternation of some humans, the non-human primates alone of all animals other than human, most resemble in form and behaviour the human animal. 'They are neither completely human, nor completely animal, but both at once'. None *but* the other primates 'inhabit the margins of humanity'¹⁶, a

¹² R. Corbey, 'Ambiguous Apes', in *The Great Ape Project*, eds., P. Cavalieri & P. Singer, (Fourth Estate, London, 1993), p. 129.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁵ I am of the opinion that the present taxonomical categorisation of the chimpanzee primate and the human primate does not honestly reflect the human's kin relationship to them. In evolutionary terms, the chimpanzee and the human share a 'recent' common ancestor, are genetically dissimilar by less than 1% and yet are classified within separate families, namely Pongidae and Hominidae respectively.

¹⁶ Corbey, 'Ambiguous Apes', p. 130.

collective of privileged primates reluctant to accept, let alone approve, a change in status for our cousins from 'object' to *subject*.

The realisation within recent times of the Great Ape's capacity to be self-aware, to reason and to feel has gradually altered, to a degree, cultural perception of them and given rise to the dilemma regarding their disenfranchisement from the moral domain. The rigid distinction traditionally assumed to exist between the human and other animals has proved difficult to maintain, especially in light of indisputable evidence of the primate origins of humankind.¹⁷ In addition, a more sophisticated understanding gained through the scientific disciplines including genetics and molecular biology has led to a reappraisal of the existing taxonomic systems, particularly with regard to the human/animal distinction. Furthermore, recent field studies and scientific research have contributed to scientific and ethical challenges to existing theories and beliefs in relation to our kinship with, and our unethical treatment of, the other Great Apes.

Results from studies conducted to assess the cognitive abilities of the primates have issued a challenge to the most cherished 'hallmark' of the human—the ability to reason. The ability to reason arises from the faculty of consciousness, the origin of the experiences referred to as thought, self-awareness, emotions, intentionality etc. The human's claim to be entitled to occupy a privileged and dominant position within the natural world, including the animal kingdom, is based upon the belief that the human animal alone has the 'unique' ability to reason. This claim, however, is contested by researchers Roger Fouts and Deborah Fouts¹⁸ following their studies with chimpanzee primates. The researchers claim that demonstrations of an array of a complex set of abilities, and spontaneous communication amongst themselves and with human researchers, verifies the undeniable existence, within the chimpanzee primates, of non-human thought.

¹⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, (Faber & Faber, London, (1889), 1979). Whilst Darwin did not emphatically state that the human being was indeed an ape (p. 217) his explication of the origins of vegetative and animal species (being both a biological and an evolutionary process) resulted in altered cultural perceptions and eventual scientific acceptance of the primate origins of humankind.

¹⁸ R.S. Fouts and D.H. Fouts, 'Chimpanzees' Use of Sign Language', in Cavalieri & Singer, *The Great Ape Project*, pp. 28-41.

In one particular investigation¹⁹ of the cognitive abilities of chimpanzees, Fouts and Fouts conducted a remote videotaped study of chimpanzees using American sign language in over five thousand instances. According to Fouts and Fouts, demonstrations of certain behaviours previously considered unique to the human and associated with the human's reasoning process were demonstrated to be present within the chimpanzees. For example, like humans, chimpanzees are able to use what is referred to as 'referential communication', that is, the chimpanzees have the ability to think about, and comment on things and events in their environment. In addition, the employment of 'informative signing' indicates that the chimpanzees are able to ask for things not in their immediate environment.²⁰ The ability to refer to things and events not in an immediate environment was previously thought to be an ability that only humans are capable of possessing. Also, the use by the chimpanzee subjects of 'expressive signing' to spontaneously express an emotion when upset or excited by something²¹ is an indication that chimpanzees, as well as humans, subjectively experience emotions. Furthermore, according to Fouts and Fouts, chimpanzees not only displayed evidence of imagination and memory but are able, following the acquisition of human sign language, to pass the language on to following generations.²²

It is apparent from results of this particular study by Fouts and Fouts that chimpanzee beings are able not only to communicate within their own kind, but possess the capacity to reason to the extent that they have the ability to 'adopt' a human language to reciprocate the human's attempt to communicate with them. The study further indicates that chimpanzee beings are capable of acting with a sense of purpose, that is, intentionally, and that they too experience emotions. The study therefore negates the human being's claim to what was previously considered an ability unique to the human—reason. It also provides an opportunity to challenge another human presumption: on the basis that humans are biologically unique because of their capacity to reason and are therefore intrinsically

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 33-39.

²⁰ Fouts and Fouts, 'Chimpanzees' Use of Sign Language', p. 35.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

²² *ibid.*, pp. 36-39.

valuable, the human alone of all creatures is the sole creature eligible and entitled to claim the right to a life infused with physical, intellectual and emotional dignity.

If acceptance into the community of equals is on the proviso that one be a conscious being, that is a *being* able to reason, having the capacity to feel emotions, feel pain and suffering, and be self-aware, then the evidence from the above study alone indicates that calls to include the other Great Apes within the human moral domain are not based upon theoretical delusion or misplaced sentimentality, but upon empirically verifiable facts.

According to the '*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*'²³ the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world depends upon recognition of not only the inherent dignity of the human being but the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.²⁴ The fundamental rights accorded to humans: 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment' (Articles 3 and 5)²⁵, were intended as a common standard by which nations could promote respect for the intrinsic value of all members of their communities and the human species universally. These particular rights are vital to human beings, particularly if they are living within societies reluctant to recognise the intrinsic worth of an individual. Without them their hopes of living a life with some sense of security and general well-being are diminished.

Needless to say, if the human scientific establishment eventually managed to recognise the human being's kinship with the other Great Apes, the human moral community also needs to do some research. The universal human moral community is in a position to use its moral agency to recognise that a number of 'our family' are being denied the opportunity to exercise *their* inalienable rights to life, liberty and freedom from torture.

²³ The General Assembly, United Nations, '*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*' (1948), in *Human Rights*, C. Freeman, (B.T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1990), pp. 66-68.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 11.

In 'A Declaration on the Great Apes'²⁶, a group of persons concerned with the current status and plight of the other Great Apes is lobbying for the 'extension of the community of equals to include all great apes: human beings, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans'.²⁷ The 'community of equals' is defined as the moral community within which its members accept certain basic moral principles or rights as governing their relations with each other and which are enforceable at law.²⁸ Amongst these principles or rights are included:

- **The Right to Life**

The lives of members of the community of equals are to be protected. Members of the community of equals may not be killed except in very strictly defined circumstances, for example, self-defence.

- **The Protection of Individual Liberty**

Members of the community of equals are not to be arbitrarily deprived of their liberty.

- **The Prohibition of Torture**

The deliberate infliction of severe pain on a member of the community of equals, either wantonly or for an alleged benefit to others, is regarded as torture, and is wrong.²⁹

As mentioned previously, of all the Great Apes, only the human ape is protected by legislation against denial of the above three basic rights. The human ape also has recourse to anti-discrimination laws, unlike our cousins, who are dependent upon others to combat the crime of 'speciesism'.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ *ibid.*

Speciesism, as defined by Singer, is 'a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species'.³⁰ Given that there are differences between humans and non-human primates, and that the capacity to reason within the other primates is not as 'sophisticated' as the humans' ability to reason, it needs to be recognised that there are also members of the human community with varying degrees of mental capacity.³¹

Human individuals such as infants, comatose and brain-damaged persons and those afflicted with mental illness are protected by statutory rights from being excluded from the human moral community regardless of their mental capacities and/or ability to exercise their autonomy. 'If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his(sic) own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?'.³² It stands to reason that on the basis that the other Great Apes possess consciousness, self-awareness, and have the capacity to reason and experience emotions, they are just as entitled to be included within the community of equals as are the able and less abled members of our species.

It is beyond dispute that the primates, including the human, share a specific morphological feature - the central nervous system - a product of which is the physical experience of pain. Considering that it has been scientifically proven that the other primates also have self-awareness, one could safely infer that they, along with the human primate, share not only the feeling of pain but also the experience of misery arising as a result of it. Apart from physiological evidence, common sense should enable the human species to acknowledge that suffering as a result of experiencing pain is an experience common to both us and the other primates. This knowledge does not generally appear, however, to impel

³⁰ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1976), p. 7.

³¹ Heta Hayry and Matti Hayry, 'Who's Like Us?', in Cavalieri & Singer, *The Great Ape Project*, p. 176.

³² Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 7.

human beings to exercise their moral agency in a manner humane to our kin.

A human being in possession of his/her faculty of consciousness is aware that there is a limit to the endurance of pain. Upon reaching a point at which endurance is insufferable, at least the human can physically *and* verbally articulate his/her anguish. Recognition of the commonality of the experience of misery resulting from suffering pain does not appear to be a primary concern in the attitude of some humans conducting experiments upon other sentient animals, including the other primates. As Singer has succinctly noted '[w]hile we overlook our savagery, we exaggerate that of other animals'.³³

The human species, let alone a human community of equals, is somewhat of a misnomer. In spite of nations uniting and declaring a charter of universal human rights, historically, some western individuals and their societies have not always managed to behave in an egalitarian manner. The subjugation of women and enslavement or genocide of indigenous peoples, for instance, are prime examples of some peoples' attitudes to certain members of the species. Human resistance to change is understandable to the degree that those occupying positions of power and dominance are reluctant to alter the 'status quo' and forgo their privileges. Some humans' propensity to assume a recalcitrant attitude is, I believe, rather accurately reflected in the following quote:

Man usually either considers himself a self-made animal and consequently adores his maker, or assumes himself to be the creation of a supreme intelligence, for which the latter is alternately congratulated and blamed. An attitude of humility, abasement, contrition, and apology for its shortcomings is thoroughly uncharacteristic of the species *Homo sapiens*, except as a manifestation of religion. I am convinced that this most salutary of religious attitudes should be carried over into science.

³³ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 248.

Man should confess his evolutionary deficiencies, and resolve that, in future, he will try to be a better animal.³⁴

Given that our understanding of biological beings has advanced, especially since the advent of molecular biology, and given the scientific evidence of the existence of reason and self-awareness in the non-human primates, contemporary society is now in a position to seriously consider evidence repudiating former views which were detrimental to the well being of the primates. As Hooton states, the human animal could indeed be a better animal. Rather than presuming that *Homo sapiens* is positioned at the pinnacle of the evolutionary process, the human species could extend consideration to all the other animals. The other animals could be viewed as successful adaptors of their specific species, animals who *too* can reason and feel. At the very least, the other Great Apes could be extended the courtesy of being treated as the subjects they are and receive their due entitlements of 'the right to life, the protection of individual liberty and freedom from torture'.³⁵

As the present situation stands, intervention in the non-human primates' lives in human controlled situations is not without attendant complications. It is obvious upon reading the concerned, even passionate, accounts³⁶ of their encounters with the other Great Apes, that some researchers, observers and carers hold these special Beings in the highest esteem. However, by imparting specifically human cultural behaviours and concepts to the other primates there is, I believe, the possibility of some members of the human species attempting to impose our culture upon them.

Our level of awareness, apart from bringing us our most exquisite joys, also brings us our greatest angst and, at times, awesome sorrow.

³⁴ E.A. Hooton, from 'Apes, Men and Morons' (1937), quoted in *The Evolution of Evil*, T. Anders, (Open Court, Illinois, 1994), p. 73.

³⁵ The Editors and Contributors, 'A Declaration on Great Apes', Cavalieri & Singer, *The Great Ape Project*, p.4.

³⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 1-312.

What does it mean to be a *self-conscious animal*?
The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It
means to know that one is food for worms. This
is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to
have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner
feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life
and self-expression – and with all this yet to
die.³⁷

Imposition of the 'condition' known as human upon the other Great
Apes would be highly questionable, if not inhumane. Far better they,
our cousins -

relish their freedom under their canopies and skies
we be relieved of reading their suffering with
mad, bleeding eyes. E.M.

Bernard Rollin's inspirational appeal for the extension of the right to
life, liberty and freedom from torture to the non-human primates:

We should let them be...(with) their
inexhaustible wonders and grandeur, And let
the dictum be proclaimed – know without
hunting, see without manipulating, cherish in
itself, not for myself³⁸

captures a notion of equality already implicit in feminist ethics. It is
one, I believe, which could foster not only acceptance of, but a
universal respect for, *all* living beings regardless of sex, gender, race
or species.

One would hope with the approaching millennium and the
corresponding two thousandth anniversary of the western ethical
system - which claims mercy to be one of its principal tenets - the
human species would unfetter, from the criminal arena of
speciesism, our primate cousins.

³⁷ E. Becker, quoted in T. Anders, *The Evolution of Evil*, p. 179.

³⁸ B.E. Rollin, 'The Ascent of Apes - Broadening the Moral Community', in
Cavalieri & Singer, *The Great Ape Project*, p. 216.

For my cousins -

(especially 'the Girls')

My cousins are wailing, waiting
The earth is listening, weeping
I am hearing, hurting
Learning, believing
Planning.

E.M.

Biography

Elizabeth is a mature-age Arts undergraduate student at Sydney University, majoring in philosophy. Since early childhood she has been 'haunted' by what being human means. She intends to undertake further studies of the human/animal debate, and in particular, a study of the writings of feminists within the field. Elizabeth lives in an inner-city suburb of Sydney and shares her home and small, but precious, leafy garden with four other females: her daughters, Emma and Breeze and two beloved furry friends.

